

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 5256

As of February 9, 2023

Title: An act relating to making permanent and expanding the child welfare housing assistance program.

Brief Description: Making permanent and expanding the child welfare housing assistance program.

Sponsors: Senators Saldaña, Wilson, C., Frame, Hasegawa, Hunt, Kuderer, Lovelett, Lovick, Nguyen, Nobles, Robinson, Valdez and Wellman; by request of Department of Children, Youth, and Families.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Human Services: 1/23/23, 1/31/23 [DPS-WM].
Ways & Means: 2/09/23.

Brief Summary of First Substitute Bill

- Directs the Department of Children, Youth and Families to administer the child welfare housing program, which is no longer a pilot program.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

Majority Report: That Substitute Senate Bill No. 5256 be substituted therefor, and the substitute bill do pass and be referred to Committee on Ways & Means.

Signed by Senators Wilson, C., Chair; Kauffman, Vice Chair; Boehnke, Ranking Member; Frame, Nguyen, Warnick and Wilson, J..

Staff: Alison Mendiola (786-7488)

SENATE COMMITTEE ON WAYS & MEANS

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Staff: Joshua Hinman (786-7281)

Background: Child Welfare Housing Assistance Pilot Program. In 2019, the Legislature passed 2SSB 5718 which directed the Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF) to establish the Child Welfare Housing Assistance Pilot Program (CWHAPP) to provide housing vouchers, rental assistance, navigation, and other support services to eligible families. The purpose of the program is to shorten the time children remain in out-of-home care. This program is limited to two pilots, one county in Eastern Washington and one county in Western Washington. The CWHAPP was to expire in June 30, 2022, and was subsequently funded for another year through ESSB 5693 (2022).

Eligibility. A parent with a child who is dependent, and whose primary remaining barrier to reunification is the lack of appropriate housing, is eligible for CWHAPP. Families may be referred to CWHAPP by a caseworker, an attorney, a guardian ad litem, a child welfare parent mentor, an Office of Public Defense social worker, or the court.

On March 1, 2022 DCYF submitted a report on the program's outcomes to the Legislature. At the time of the report, six families—including 15 family members—have been housed, and another 29 families have been provided case management, including orientation; housing application support; connections to employment services; connections to medical, behavioral, and personal support; accessing and transferring personal documents; creating partnerships, and other services that build trust. Of the 34 adults served with case management, representing 29 families, which included 90 children, the majority, nearly 75 percent, identified themselves through the application process as White. Among the other nine participants, two identified themselves as American Indian or Alaska Native, one identified themselves as Black or African American, and five chose not respond to the question. DCYF did not collect information on Hispanic/Latino heritage. The gender distribution for adults was approximately two-thirds female and one-third male.

DCYF recommends that the Homecoming Program should:

- serve reunifying families earlier, and should serve other families to prevent removal or deeper Child Protective Services involvement; and
- be offered statewide or, at a minimum, continued as a pilot, due to COVID-related impacts, noting the disruptive effect of COVID-19, an underlying lack of housing stock, a slow start getting referrals, and a lack of positive experiences of both property owners and DCYF client families with housing case management all caused delays in implementation of the Homecoming Program.

Summary of Bill (First Substitute): DCYF shall administer the Child Welfare Housing Program, in one or more counties in eastern and western Washington, within funds appropriated for this specific purpose. The Child Welfare Housing Program (Program) is intended to reduce the need for foster care placement and to shorten the time children remain in out-of-home care when placement is necessary.

The following families are eligible for assistance from the Program:

- a parent with a child who is dependent and a lack of appropriate housing is a remaining barrier to reunification; and
- a parent of a child who is a candidate for foster care and whose housing instability is a barrier to the child remaining in the home.

DCYF shall contract with an outside entity or entities who must have a demonstrated understanding of the importance of stable housing for children and families involved, or at risk of being involved, with the child welfare system, to operate the Program.

Annually beginning November 1, 2024, DCYF shall report to the Legislature and the Governor, at a minimum, when available, the distribution of the Program by race, geography, ethnicity, and gender including a discuss of whether of this distribution is equitable and include any recommendations for legislative changes to the Program.

EFFECT OF CHANGES MADE BY HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE (First Substitute):

Modifies the reporting requirement for DCYF to require that the report by providing annually beginning November 1, 2024 and at a minimum, including information, when available, regarding distribution of the Program by race, geography, ethnicity, and gender including a discuss of whether of this distribution is equitable and any recommendations for legislative changes to the Program.

Appropriation: The bill contains a section or sections to limit implementation to the availability of amounts appropriated for that specific purpose.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Creates Committee/Commission/Task Force that includes Legislative members: No.

Effective Date: The bill contains an emergency clause and takes effect on June 30, 2023.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony on Original Bill (Human Services): *The committee recommended a different version of the bill than what was heard.* PRO: This program is a way for families to stay together. No matter the circumstance, a child being removed from the home is traumatic and in the long run causes more harm than good. A family's housing instability shouldn't be the reason why a family is not reunified. When a child is returned home, the child's anxiety goes down and they have better outcomes.

Persons Testifying (Human Services): PRO: Senator Rebecca Saldaña, Prime Sponsor; Michael Mirra, Admin Office of the Courts Steering Committee for Family Treatment Courts; Terreca DeFehr, Parents for Parents Program Coordinator; Carol Mitchell, Institute for Black Justice; Emily Stone, WA State Coalition Against Domestic Violence; Allison

Krutsinger, Dept of Children, Youth, and Families.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying (Human Services): No one.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony (Ways & Means): PRO: Public housing authorities are the largest housing providers and there is great need for a statewide program. Thirty percent of foster care placements could be shortened with stable housing. This investment could leverage \$26 million in housing vouchers and bring families together.

Testifier experienced homelessness after children were removed, followed by prolonged reunification for six months until a housing voucher was secured. Keeping families together requires stability, and housing equals stability. This bill will save the state money in costly out-of-home care.

Testifier works with families, of which 40 percent of cases lack stable housing and this presents a significant barrier to reunification. Many of these families are ready for reunification and have taken care of such things as parenting services, mental health, etc. The last remaining barrier is housing. Foster care can damage children and they should not be away from parents longer than necessary. Foster care is expensive to the state.

Administrative Office of Courts testifier supports passage because judicial officers, case workers, local court coordinators, and others all express that lack of housing is a significant barrier. It is needless trauma. Some children in foster care experience hopelessness and despair, which carries to adulthood. We should only remove children when absolutely necessary and for only as long as necessary. Poverty and lack of housing is a common problem associated with unsafe settings for children. Lack of stable housing shouldn't be a reason to be away from your child. More families should have more access to critical housing support.

Preventing separation and making separation time shorter will save the state money and help prevent trauma. Lack of stable housing is a significant barrier to reunification. Washington has a great need for a statewide program to address separated families and those at risk of separation. This bill will make the child welfare housing program permanent. Housing alone is not enough; the state must also provide funding.

Persons Testifying (Ways & Means): PRO: Senator Rebecca Saldaña, Prime Sponsor; Jill Stanton, Bremerton Housing Authority & Association of Washington Housing Authorities; Terrecia DeFehr, Parent Ally; Shane Silverthorn, Yakima County Superior Court; Kelly Warner-King, Administrative Office of the Courts.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying (Ways & Means): No one.